

## **Santhal in Assam: Their status and position in the nation.**

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### **Introduction:-**

The modern word Santhals, as mentioned Samanpalas in the Mahabharata, have a dignified role among the Indian Tribal People. They are traditionally known as “first people” or indigenous people. Santhals belong the pre-Aryan period. They were the great fighters during the British regime in India. They waged war against the permanent settlement of Lord Carn Walls in 1855. During the late 1850 santhals hero Sidhu had accumulated around 10 thousand santhals to run paralled government against the British Government. Baba TilkaMajhi was the first santhalleader who raise weapons against the Britishers in 1789.

Santhal came into Assam under the British rule with the Yandabu Treaty of 1826. There were different rulers and kings in different places in the upper (east) and lower (west) Assam. i.e. the Ahom kings and Koch kings, respectively. After the treaty, the rulers and the kings were paid renunerations and the British administration was in full control.

The British discovered tea in the early 1820s when the native tea leaf in Assam, long brewed by the Singpho tribe, and was presented to a certain military man by the name of Bruce. The British East India Company (in realizing the possibility of regaining monopoly from China in tea production) took over Assam in 1826 from the Ahom kings through the Yandaboo Treaty. Soon in 1837, the first tea garden was established at Chabua in Dibrugarh District of the upper Assam and in 1840 the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis. The tea industry started expanding rapidly from the 1850s onwards.

The Adivasi people as well as the santhals are in a great number i.e. more than one crore in Assam. Majority of the santhal people are connected with the tea industry.

This paper is mainly highlighted on santhal (backward community) and their some pin points:-

- (i)To study their status and position in Assam.
- (ii)Tea garden labourer in Assam and
- (iii)To study the S.T. status in Assam.

Santhal status and position in Assam:-

In Assam santhal people, both in the present in the past were laborious people, and always had social links with the labour class. Their ‘forefather’ cultural society was formed on the basis of primitive communism. The social status of one community generally depended upon its cultural status. Their progress and prosperity depended on their continuous activities of cultural elements and their reflections. Before becoming tea garden labourers in Assam, they were all poor peasants small wage earners and common people under the feudal rulers. The Britishers, under their supervision brought these people as labourers in the tea gardens of Assam to work on contract. In this way, they were supplied to the industrial places where the tea company started plantations. These labourers where easily found on low wage contracts.

The santhals, in the past were engaged in collection of forest produce, hunting, fishing and cultivation on hills slopes. Their main trading craft was extraction of oil and manufacture of lime. But at present, the mainstay of the santhal is agriculture, rice, maize, mullets, beans and vegetables are the chief crops produced.

“The santhal people in Assam consist of almost 150 sub-sects. The santhals in particular consist of twelve sects mostly found in the villages of the district of kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Nalbari, Darrang, Lakshimpur, Nowgaon and Dibrugarh. But the said 150 sub-sects of the Adivasi people are found in all the 850 tea estates of Assam, more or less in equal numbers. These tea estates have covered the land area of Assam within 28 to 29 percent and the labourer number more than 15 lakhs”.

There are more than 70 lakhs people as tribes in Assam. They are from all sects and sub-sects of the Kol community. More than 1/4 of the total population of Assam are the tea tribes. Ninety percent people of them are illiterate. Ninety five percent of them work as wage earners, ploughmen, roadside workers and labourers, house construction, dams and barrage workers and rikshaw pullers. In this way, their life ways and occupation have been divided between village life and tea garden life.

Education levels, health indicators and poverty levels for santhals are among the worst of all the communities in Assam. Many santhal families find it difficult to get their children into educational institutions and later on in finding proper employment. Furthermore, while santhals, both tea garden and ex-tea garden communities form nearly 20 percent of the population, their representation in the legislative assembly is markedly lesser. They are disproportionately affected by natural disasters with erosions and floods frequently taking away their small farms. The governments ex-gratia in the event of these disasters is insufficient, while exploitation through usury is rampant.

Santhal are the lowest human development indices of all the communities in India. Poverty, illiteracy, political disenfranchisement and immense socio-economic problems are the main reason for the human development in all the communities of Adivasi. There are numerous other issues that the Adivasis face such as lack of economic franchise, serious labour exploitation and social problems such as alcoholism that will require strenuous social movement to tackle.

When santhal arrived in Assam, their education is low, trade unions weak and land alienation high among them. Their wages are low, do not have sources of credit, they own very little land and lack of social adjustment.

The various Five Year Plan and education policies has laid emphasis on certain measures for educational development of Scheduled Tribe (santhal), which include continuation of existing programmes for pre-matric education, expansion of residential schools including ashram schools, opening of primary schools, anganwadies, non-formal and adult education centers in tribal areas. The Assam SarvaSikhshaAbhiyan Mission Constituted the tea garden education committee (TGEC) and Assam human development report estimates that 1000 tea garden education committees were set up by 2003.

### **TEA GARDEN LABOURER IN ASSAM:**

However the history of the santhals (tea garden labour) in Assam really starts from the 1850 onwards and is directly connected with the tea industry.

All the santhals in Assam trace their immediate history through this torturous route of indentured, immigrant labour brought into work in the tea gardens and it is precisely this labour that has resulted in the now legendary Assam tea. Tea is the product of the cumulative toil of the labourers. It is mainly because of their hardships that we have the golden brew which cheers thousands. The North East region of India is home of the world finest variety of tea. It also account for a large bulk of the worlds tea output.

The condition of the tea garden workers continues to be abysmal. While Adivasis are from the vast majority of the workers, there are also small percentages of other tribal communities, as well as Nepalis, Bengalis, Oriyas and so on. Ranjit Das Gupta in his paper "From peasants and Tribesmen to plantation labour was essentially unfree labour and while payment modes, work organization etc, were similar to other segments of the industrial labour force, there were also many distinctive socio-economic traits, with plantations essentially being enclave economics combining both agricultural and industrial characteristics. Workers were in essence transported (forcibly, one might add) from non-capitalist, sustenance economics to working under the command of capital. During the initial decades from the 1850s until around the 1920s under the British, the working conditions were akin to slavery, with flogging rape, torture and even the throwing of dead workers in rivers.

In Assam, santhal are direct connected with the tea industry but the condition of tea garden labour is deteriorate. The welfare schemes are provided for the labour in the tea garden are in very pathetic condition. Majority of the tea garden labourer do not have proper health facility, drinking water sanitation etc.

Today, there are slogans from the tea-gardens for their children, proper education by the trained teachers, But , in practice, there is one untrained teacher almost in every school of the gardens among the 90 students or more than that. This is nothing but the violation of the human rights. The tea garden labourers were 90 percent illiterate at time of the census of 1991 and the number of children used in the factories, works out to 41,000 in number. This proves that the ruling and controlling started in the colonial, period is still in existence. This step motherly attitude of the Indian sahibs in tea gardens, pinched this labour class which some times break their patience in the gardens through the agitations.

Today, some of the santhals have settled into agriculture. Even those engaged in tea garden work own cultivable land given to them by the tea garden management. About 70% of the tea garden santhal own no land. About 30% own 1 to 7 bighas of land per family.

The Directorate for welfare of Tea Garden Tribes (including ex-tea garden people) implements schemes for the welfare of tea-tribe population. For promotion of education, scholarships award and grants-in-aid are provided by the directorate. It also supports welfare works and cultural activities by NGOs. The Directorate was established in 1983 in the state for the welfare of the tea tribes community and has been implementing various schemes. The Directorate received funds under the planned assistance of plan tribes development of the central government. Although state governments have not as yet recognized the community as tribes under state schedule, but presently receive an allocation from the central government under the plain tribe welfare head. The directorate received 50% of the fund from central budget and the remaining 50% from the state government plan allocation.

### **TO STUDY THE S.T. STATUS (SANTHAL) IN ASSAM:**

The Adivasis in Assam are at a critical juncture today in terms of defining themselves socially, politically, culturally and economically. This situation is made particularly crucial given the emergence of autonomous territories such as Bodoland, Lalung, Karbi and Mishing Autonomous Councils. It is thus immensely important to deconstruct this particular demand for ST status, which has been a longstanding struggle from all the Adivasi organizations in Assam ever since the state de-scheduled them in 1947 after Independence, especially as in all other regions of India, they have been deemed as deserving of Scheduled Tribes status due to historical oppression, conditions which are no different in Assam.

Thus the issues of disenfranchisement that the Adivasis, both in and out of the tea gardens, face are numerous and deeply entrenched. Some of the more prominent Adivasi organizations like the All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA) as well as groups active with tea garden workers like the Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA) point to a particular policy feature that is historically missing here in Assam, which is the granting of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the Adivasis. The granting of this status is something these groups feel would go great lengths in ameliorating the historically oppressed condition of the Adivasis in Assam.

An important question to thus ask is: If Adivasis have been deemed as deserving of ST status in every other part of India, why then has it been denied to them all these years after Independence in Assam?

Among the prevailing broad-based arguments (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) surrounding this issue include:-

- 1.Adivasis came from outside the region i.e. migrated here as labourers to work in the tea gardens, hence cannot technically be considered as indigenous tribal.
- 2.They have not faced the historic discrimination and exploitation that the other tribes in the region have faced.
- 3.Granted ST status to Adivasis will dilute the franchise that other communities have gained through years of struggle to gain their own special status as well as political power in territorial councils.
- 4.There is some question with regards to the economic contribution of the Adivasi community to the state of Assam.
- 5.Adivasis have not assimilated properly enough into Assamese society and often practice their own cultures, languages and traditions within secluded enclaves outside the purview of the larger Assamese society. It is important to examine and deconstruct each of these arguments. They can by no means be converted to simple black or white reductions as numerous aspirations in the face of military and cultural hegemony play into this complex issue.

### **CONCLUSION:**

It is observed that santhal are the lowest human development indices of all the communities in India as like as Assam. Poverty, Illiteracy, political disenfranchisement and immense socio-economic problems are the main reason for the human development in all the communities of santhal. When santhal came into Assam, their education is low, trade unions weak and land alienation high among them. The condition of tea garden labourer is deteriorate. Majority of the tea garden labourer do not have proper health facility, drinking water, sanitation etc. The tea garden labourer still exists as an indentured laboured in the 21st century raises the larger question of identity in recent times. During the last 150 year, the tea community in Assam never received proper attention in the development process. It is observed that by receiving the special provision of ST status will not be at help to them to uplift their socio-economic status.

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